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No time to hedge? Articulating a European pillar within the Alliance

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NATO has for seven decades seen its share of crisis, argument and division. Still, few would disagree that the presidency of Donald Trump has added a new layer of discord and unpredictability to what the late Michael Howard once described as “an unhappy successful marriage”.¹ Germany, France, and Denmark have all been brow-beaten by the US President, and even the UK, America’s staunchest ally, has been taken aback by Trump’s behaviour.² But there is something far worse going on here than a marital argument. By calling into question America’s commitment to Article 5 and even to NATO membership itself Trump has, in

effect, threatened a divorce.³ True, Trump’s words are often at odds with American actions. US material commitment to NATO remains strong, evident in the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), and US participation in exercises such as Trident Juncture and Defender Europe 20. But words still matter, particularly when spoken by a President with a maximalist interpretation of his prerogative powers.

European governments may not welcome it, but Trump has raised the possibility of American abandonment. So, the Allies have been forced to consider their options. All European capitals recognize there is no realistic alternative to “Plan A” – a credible American security guarantee – but many are beginning to think of a “Plan B” outside of NATO that supplements the fragile transatlantic link. This sort of reaction to the “Trump shock” is understandable but ill-conceived. Hedging in this way might end up triggering exactly what the Europeans wish to avoid: the US walking away from its European Allies. There is a risk, in other words, that the hedge will become a wedge. The European Allies should instead up their game in support of NATO and return to the idea of a European pillar in the Alliance. A stronger and more coherent European contribution to defence and security that straddles both NATO and the EU would demonstrate to a sceptical audience in Washington that NATO-Europe is pulling its weight in the trans-Atlantic Alliance. “Plan A” is still alive, but it could do with a bit of life support.

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1 M. Howard, “NATO at Fifty. An unhappy successful marriage: security means knowing what to expect”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.78, No.3, 1999.

2 A. Bienkov, “The UK is abandoning its alliance with Trump as the United States ‘withdraws from its leadership around the world’”, *Business Insider*, 12 January 2020.

3 J. Benitez, “US NATO policy in the age of Trump: controversy and consistency”, *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol.43, No.1, 2019.

European hedging

We see signs of three types of reaction to the Trump-shock: making “Plan A” work by alleviating American frustration at NATO-Europe, the bilateralisation of transatlantic security relations, and regionalization.

Making “Plan A” work

While European policymakers are thinking of a “Plan B”, most are concomitantly still trying to keep “Plan A” alive. The hope here is to bring the US back to normality. The Trump administration must be convinced that the Europeans are hard-working, reliable Allies worth a security pledge. Or even better, that it is in America’s own interest to guarantee NATO-Europe’s security.⁴

A European defence effort separate from NATO and, by extension the US, is simply incapable of carrying out collective defence missions and, indeed, has limited abilities in crisis management

European NATO-members have thus been quick to react to American calls for increased efforts in the fight against terrorism. At the NATO summit in May 2017, the Allies agreed to a counter-terrorism Action Plan involving more AWACS flight time, NATO membership in the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS, and a new terrorism intelligence cell at NATO headquarters. The London Leaders’ Meeting in December 2019 agreed to refresh these activities. In parallel, NATO has applied a wide definition to its counter-terrorism efforts, embracing the agenda of Projecting Stability, the Afghanistan operation and the Iraq Training Mission. Such gestures may appear symbolic but accommodating the Trump administration has clearly been a key strategic objective.

Equally important have been efforts to boost defence spending. To be sure, the European Allies’ willingness to invest here has several causes, including genuine concerns over Russia and emergence from the 2008 financial crisis. Increases go back to the Obama period, but Trump has kept the Allies’ feet to the fire. The pressure to meet NATO’s two percent defence spending pledge has been relentless. Many Allies, it is true, will fail to meet that target by 2024, but as Germany has found out, it is now impossible to ignore the call

from Washington to make greater efforts.

Europeans have also proven tractable to other US demands. NATO defence ministers in June 2018 agreed to the NATO Readiness Initiative (NRI), a scheme aimed at creating by 2020 a force pool ready to mobilize 30 battalions, 30 naval combat vessels and 30 air squadrons in under 30 days. The NRI is the latest in a string of NATO initiatives geared toward rapid deployment and reinforcement. But it has already delivered, with significant commitments laid down by the UK, Germany and France.⁵

Bilateralisation

Trump’s disparagement of NATO has set in motion a new wave of European attempts to obtain bilateral commitments from Washington. In 2019 alone, Greece, Hungary and the three Baltic States reached defence cooperation agreements with the US. Slovakia was in the process of negotiating one. The bilateral tendency, however, is at its most obvious in the case of Poland. Despite being a beneficiary of NATO’s post-2014 reorientation toward collective defence, Poland still regards the NATO presence as unsatisfactory. The enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) contingent on its territory is both relatively small (just 1,200 troops including over 800 Americans) and, formally-speaking, “persistent” and “rotational” rather than permanent. Poland, despite its exposed position facing Russia, still does not enjoy the standing of NATO Allies such as Germany, Italy and the UK, all of which have had a sizeable American military presence on their territories for decades.

Since the spring of 2018 – and quite blatantly appealing to the US president’s ego – Polish president Andrzej Duda has been calling for a permanent American “Fort Trump” on Polish soil. Following a year of negotiations, it seemed unlikely that Poland would get its wish – the Trump administration having settled in mid-2019 on an extra 1,000 troops (some transferred from Germany) that would be dispersed across the country. Yet, the dial of Polish-US defence relations has clearly moved. The defence agreement provides logistical support for the rapid deployment of an armoured division in the event of a crisis or large-scale exercise.⁶ Separately, the Polish government has agreed to purchase 32 F-35A Joint Strike fighter jets and in 2018 signed a USD4.75 billion contract for a new Patriot air defence system. That Poland now hits

4 NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg’s speech to the US Congress, Washington, DC, 3 April 2019.

5 N. Fiorenza, “NATO improves force readiness”, *Janes Defence Weekly*, 4 December 2019.

6 S.J.Freedberg, “Poland deal lays groundwork for division-strength deployment”, *Breaking Defense*, 13 June 2019.

NATO's two percent target is largely because of a spending spree on American equipment. President Duda has suggested the bilateral connection with the US is meant to supplement NATO, not replace it. However, Poland is unabashedly advertising its defence credentials to Washington, in a move seemingly designed to provide it with a version of most-favoured nation status within the Alliance.⁷

European regionalization

A third possible type of reaction to the Trump-shock is European regionalization. Discussion of a regional solution to Europe's defence needs is as old as NATO itself. Some issues here are relatively benign. No one imagines that the French-initiated European Intervention Initiative (E2I), the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), and Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) will ever develop into genuine alternatives to NATO and thus to the US security guarantee.

Much greater significance and controversy attaches to the EU. Its efforts at security and defence cooperation go back to the 1990s. The most recent step change is the commitment to "strategic autonomy" contained in the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS). Adopted the year *before* Trump took office, the EUGS was a response to "crises within and beyond" the EU's borders, the expectations and responsibilities that follow from the EU's self-image as a global player, and the need to assert EU competencies in the face of Brexit.⁸ But judging from interviews we conducted with senior diplomats in Brussels, Berlin, and Copenhagen, it is clear that unease at the Trump administration has since helped carry the initiative forward.

The same holds true for other important EU moves launched after 2016. The establishment of a Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), the Co-ordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), a European Defence Fund (EDF) with a proposed budget (as of late February 2020) of EUR 7 billion for 2021-2027, and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) have been given added momentum by doubts in some European capitals – Paris and Berlin especially – at America's commitment to European security.

It is France, however, which has run furthest with the idea of European autonomy. President Macron has been explicit in calling for a European army. The problems with this idea, however,

should stop it in its tracks. As a number of in-depth studies have demonstrated, a European defence effort separate from NATO and, by extension the US, is simply incapable of carrying out collective defence missions and, indeed, has limited abilities in crisis management.⁹ Further, no one outside of France really supports the idea. Chancellor Merkel has come close but German caveats are clear. Any effort channelled through the EU "must", Merkel has insisted, "be a good complement to NATO".¹⁰ In a rebuke to Macron's recent description of NATO as being "brain dead", Merkel made plain that NATO "is our security alliance" of choice.¹¹ It is certainly true that the EU has made significant strides in security and defence cooperation in recent years, but its level of ambition sits far beyond its material competence and its centre of political gravity. Brexit only confirms this as the UK post-EU will gladly retreat to NATO as its institution of choice.

The case for a European pillar in NATO

The three trends outlined above reflect messiness and controversy in Europe over how to respond to the Trump shock. The further an initiative is away from NATO, the less viable it becomes. Bilateralism is, by definition, patchy and uncoordinated. Regionalization centred on the EU is controversial and divisive. Keeping "Plan A" alive, meanwhile, works for NATO, but does not go far enough. In the years to come (whether Trump is re-elected or not), the US will need even greater reassurance that the European Allies are serious about their own defence. The European Allies would, therefore, be well-advised to invest in shaping a distinct European Pillar in NATO.

What Merkel has dubbed "the European section of NATO"¹² is an option in keeping with the purpose of "Plan A". As European scholars have de-

Articulating a European pillar within the Alliance shows Washington that Europeans are both serious about defence and in maintaining the transatlantic link

7 P. McLeary, "Defense chief: with giant exercise looming, Poland looks to lead Central Europe", *Breaking Defense*, 13 December 2019.

8 F. Mogherini, "Foreword" to *Shared vision, common action: a stronger Europe. A global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy*, June 2016.

9 European Court of Auditors, *Review*, No.09, "European Defence" (European Union, 2019).

10 Speech to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 13 November 2018.

11 Cited in *The Financial Times*, 7 November 2019.

12 Cited in "Germany's Merkel, Maas, Defend NATO after Macron's Rebuke", *Deutsche Welle*, 10 November 2019.

tailed, the US “remains the bedrock of European security through its extended security guarantees”, but the underlying force structures that constitute the regional node of European defence are sustained by key Allies.¹³ These activities, moreover, benefit the US as much as they do NATO. As Trump-era documents clearly attest, NATO assets offer a unique advantage in increasing America’s strategic reach and facing off its peer competitors.¹⁴ This description of NATO-Europe already pulling its strategic weight to America’s benefit is a productive frame for transatlantic relations. But it is important to be explicit. A European Pillar ought not to be another way of getting EU-NATO relations to work better or a clever ruse for running a political caucus of European contributors to the Alliance. Neither should it be a step toward substituting the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) for NATO in anticipation of the day the US finally takes its leave of European defence. Such steps are only likely to bog NATO down in institutional turf wars and political division, or indeed, prompt the US to rush for the exit, exactly the step most Europeans want to avoid.

The idea of a greater European role in NATO has been around for a long time. The call in the first paragraph of NATO’s 1994 Brussels Summit Declaration for a “mature Europe” to be engaged in “new patterns of cooperation” had by the 2018 Brussels Summit become a *pro forma* call tucked away in paragraph 71 for stronger European defence through NATO-EU cooperation.¹⁵ Missing in the intervening years is the idea that the European Pillar is something that can be developed or, indeed, already exists *within* NATO. It is entirely appropriate that the Allies talk up this contri-

bution and give it a political imprimatur. Calling it a European Pillar need not mean a lapse into some esoteric new endeavour of institutional redesign. It is rather a question of packaging. But unlike other NATO efforts at consolidation – the “southern strategy”, “projecting stability”, the “comprehensive approach” and so on – this one has substance in depth. It is embedded in nodal defence, in increasing European defence budgets, and in contributions to missions. NATO European personnel make up over two thirds of eFP and, along with NATO’s European partners, three quarters of KFOR in Kosovo.

Advertising this contribution to the White House is not easy. Trump has a tin ear when it comes to the assertions of America’s Allies. The headline of a European Pillar, however, is succinct enough to be heard and understood by the President, and content rich enough underneath to appeal to more sympathetic ears in Congress and the Defence and State Departments. For the appeal to be effective, NATO must also continue to partner American strategy outside Europe. Trump, or indeed, his successor will not buy into a NATO that eschews this broader perspective. The tentative NATO interest in China is already a step in the right direction. Conversely, NATO Europe must be prepared to step up where its interests are greater than America’s. A European Pillar will count for nothing if the Allies simply assume American power will again be used to pacify the Balkans, or that decisions on NATO’s relations with Ukraine and Georgia should be made in Washington and not London, Paris or Berlin.

To sum up, now is not the time to engage in hedging. The Trump administration’s rhetoric might have caused uneasiness in European capitals but solutions outside of NATO will only undermine NATO. Articulating a European Pillar within the Alliance shows Washington that Europeans are both serious about defence and in maintaining the transatlantic link.

13 L. Simón, A. Lanoszka and H. Meijer, “Nodal defence: the changing structure of US alliance systems in Europe and East Asia”, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (early view), 2019, p.12.

14 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p.48.

15 Brussels Summit Declaration, 11 January 1994; Brussels Summit Declaration, 12 July 2018.



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